MANET'S IRONIC DUPLICITY

HAMLET, BAUDELAIRE,
AND MASCULINITY

James H. Rubin

Series in Art

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I dedicate this book first to my extraordinary wife, Liliane,
as well as to the other members of my wonderful family.
Their love and their support for my research and writing
have been a huge source of strength over these many years.

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All works are by Édouard Manet and are in oil on canvas unless otherwise noted. Measurements are in centimeters. All illustrations are of works in the public domain.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

James Rubin is one of the world's foremost specialists in the history, theory, and criticism of nineteenth-century avant-garde European Art, especially that of France. His interests are interdisciplinary, with special attention to cultural history, art and politics, and art and philosophy. Born in Cambridge, Massachusetts, he was taken by his mother to Boston's Museum of Fine Arts and the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum at a young age. He was educated at Phillips Academy Andover, where he discovered the Addison Gallery, Yale (B.A.), where he first discovered art history. From there, and during the Vietnam War, he went to Paris to study at the Institut d'Art et d'Archéologie of the Sorbonne (license-ès-lettres in art history), returning to Harvard University for his PhD (1972). He has taught at Harvard, Boston University, Princeton University, The Cooper Union, and Stony Brook, the State University of New York, from which he is now retired. He has published over 70 articles and essays on subjects ranging from the eighteenth century to the present. He has given over 80 public lectures in North America, Western and Eastern Europe, and Asia. He is the author of 16 published books on Impressionism and on artists such as Eugène Delacroix, Gustave Courbet, Édouard Manet, Claude Monet, and Paul Cezanne. Several of these have been translated into other languages, including French, Greek, Korean, Japanese, and Dutch. He travels frequently, speaks fluent French, and lives in Manhattan, New York and Mittelbergheim, Alsace. He is a dual national, married to Liliane Béatrix Braesch of Strasbourg, France. Their son, Henry-Alex, is a cineaste for Smuggler and a winner of an Oscar nomination and many other awards. The daughter, Delphine McNeill, is a fashionista and co-founder of Livotte Tops, Ltd. In London. Their Boston Terrier's name is Texas Pete.

[Hamlet] is the funereal being we are all.

—Victor Hugo, William *Shakespeare*[1]

A work of art does not answer questions, it provokes them; and its essential meaning is in the tension between the contradictory answers.

—Leonard Bernstein[2]

Conflicts of values may be an intrinsic, irremovable element in human life … the possibility of conflict—and of tragedy—can never wholly be eliminated.

—Isaiah Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty"[3]

I define modernism as any attempt by modern men and women to become subjects as well as objects of modernization, to get a grip on the modern world and make themselves at home in it.

—Marshall Berman, *All that is Solid Melts into Air*[4]

PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Manet's Ironic Duplicity has had a long period of gestation and revisiting. Before I became an art historian, I studied French literature and history, eventually discovering not only that art history could combine both but also coming to believe that art can be understood as the material manifestation of a culture, albeit seen from an individual's particular viewpoint. Since my early articles on art and theater during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, I have always pursued the relationship between culture and politics through interdisciplinary and cultural studies. Since those narrow beginnings, my focus on art and politics and on politics and culture has both intensified and broadened. Relatively short and jargon-free, this book attempts to bridge the gap between professional and more general readings of both art and literature.

I first saw Manet's *Portrait of Jean-Baptiste Faure as Hamlet* (Figure 1) on a trip to the Folkwang Museum in Essen, Germany, in 2010, where, thanks to Françoise Cachin and Hartwig Fischer, I participated in the exhibition *Bilder einer Metropole*, which was partly based on my research on industrial and urban landscapes published in 2008. I first presented a sketch of this project focusing on *Hamlet* as part of a graduate seminar I taught at Stony Brook University in the same year as the visit to Essen. It took further shape thanks to Karin Westerwelle of the Universität Münster, who invited me to an interdisciplinary symposium on Baudelaire there in early 2014. In 2015, the late Sarah Lippert invited me to present an early short version as a keynote lecture for the Society of Paragone Studies at the Flint Institute of the Arts in Michigan. In 2016, Shao-Chien Tseng invited me to give seminars in Taiwan, and I was also asked to do so in Japan thanks to Nuriko Murai, Takanori Nagai, and Megumi Jingaoka. Following all these presentations, I received a number of useful comments, and I want to express my deep gratitude to all of those students and organizers. Although I soon became involved in several other projects, the book continued to evolve in my mind. I am immensely grateful for the many useful suggestions from Nicole Georgopulos, Therese Dolan, Michael Tilby, and especially Michelle Foa. I also want to thank Leah Lehmbeck, Isolde Pludermacher, and Rebecca Federman for helping me with research, including looking directly at works by Manet.

My gratitude also goes to the team at Vernon Press: Sonia Costa, Argiris Legatos, Irene Benavides, Dessy Vassileva, and Javier Rodriguez for their excellent editorial work, responsiveness, and patience with my requests. It has been a pleasure working with them and I shall certainly recommend Vernon Press to colleagues.

Finally, I am of course also indebted to many scholars who have gone before me. Rather than attempt to show that I claim this or that insight for myself, I prefer to admit that some may have come from previous readings, that others may have been "in the air," or that even if someone had the same insight and published it before me, some of them were at the same time my own. My interest in Impressionism dates to the time when, as a youngster, my mother "dragged" me to the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. At Yale, I was an undergraduate student of Robert L. Herbert, whose lectures and, later, his classic book *Impressionism: Art, Leisure, and Parisian Society* (1988) certainly left their mark. On the other hand, I doubt that anyone could possibly be familiar with every single publication in the Manet, Baudelaire, or Shakespeare literature. I apologize in advance for neglecting to reference someone who deserves it. I should also say that this book builds on my previous studies, and so if the reader is familiar with them, they will no doubt find occasional views or passages familiar. When I believe I have something truly new to say, I try to point it out, as well as when I engage in a positive and exceptional dialogue with a particular writer. In most cases, however, I have refrained from taking up arguments for or against some theory, method, interpreter or other, preferring to reframe concepts in my own words, through which I hope to make them accessible.

—*James H. Rubin*, New York City and Alsace, France, 2025

INTRODUCTION: RETHINKING MANET

Well, acting is a trick. It's not becoming someone else; I don't change myself. … I don't try to transmogrify into someone else.

—Anthony Hopkins[1]

History is an interplay between agency and structure. Historians study the past as a way to understand and explain the present. Individuals count as much as culture and circumstances in history, and both are irreducible, requiring approaches from several angles at once. The painter Édouard Manet (1832–1883) was a central figure for momentous and lasting changes in the realm of art that still resound today. His art speaks directly to the philosophical issues and political conflicts of his own time and is therefore deeply embedded in the development of a modernity that extends to our time. He is part of history while being himself; that is, he engaged directly in the circumstances of his time and place and took charge of them by responding to his situation. *Manet's Ironic Duplicity* focuses on that situation and the historically conscious artist's sometimes ambivalent struggle for authenticity.

It may be said that one measure of an artist's greatness lies in the ability of their work to make people see not only what the artist had in mind but beyond it. The book, therefore, introduces a new and original way of considering Manet's work and career in the context of a society in transition. Rather than another full chronological monograph, the book is an interdisciplinary study organized around key concepts. It reframes the major, and sometimes disparate issues in Manet scholarship by focusing on a never-before-considered overriding theme—ironic duplicity—which itself is multiple in its manifestations and variants, hence *duplicities*. This new interpretation resituates Manet not simply as someone whose essential characteristic is to challenge authority but, rather, as one who faced constant challenges to his own integrity, identity, and creative authority, a chief aspect of which was his sense of entitlement, deserved or not, and, in the end, masculinity. The latter is a stereotype understood through its commonly cited attributes—dominance through strength, courage, independence, leadership, and assertiveness—all of which Manet exhibited and often emphasized, sometimes ironically, sometimes cynically. (If a woman possessed such characteristics, she probably at the time would likely have been

considered atypical and probably threatening.) Reversing the usual narrative, this study deconstructs and enlightens the myth of the heroic artist struggling for individual and original vision by revealing how so much of Manet's creativity and irony was prompted by frustrations due to repressive politics, censorship, and challenges to his sense of self. Again, a key aspect of the latter was his masculinity. This is the underside of so-called heroism, stressing the operative forces of the social and political status quo in shaping Manet's strategies and introspection, as he chose to assert himself against the main forces and changes of his times. To those who will continue to regard Manet's challenges to tradition as heroic, one might respond that in many respects, his resistance was forced upon him, despite his positive but often frustrated wish to be understood, accepted, and acclaimed. If it is true, as the title of Stéphane Guégan's formidable and timely monographic exhibition of 2011 claimed, that Manet was the "inventor of modernity," it is equally true that, as I would say, "modernity invented Manet."[2] Karl Marx noted that although "men make their own history, … they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly found, given, and transmitted from the past."[3] There is hence another, more historically grounded side to the Manet story, one which tells us far more about his time and the conditions of "modernity," than we have yet heard for his case. Manet was indeed a man of his time, which means he was a man caught in the web of historical and cultural circumstances. These circumstances forced him to be the man we now call Manet.

In proposing that the issue of masculinity ran throughout Manet's career, I show how it underlay his strategic practices and themes. Chapter One introduces the painting of the great operatic baritone *Jean-Baptiste Faure as Hamlet* (Figure 1) and the questions it raises. Manet both represented and embodied the conditions of modernity, during which, not only politics (as I show in Chapter Two) but a rising tide of feminism challenged his masculine identity and agency. For Manet's older, and in many ways precedent-setting, contemporary, Gustave Courbet (1819–1877), masculinity had become an issue that rose pointedly to the surface of his art. Unlike Gustave Caillebotte, Manet's younger contemporary, Manet's masculinity was not expressed through a focus on male bonding, anatomy, or athleticism.[4] For Manet, by contrast, it is an underlying, at most points subconscious issue, manifest for the most part indirectly. For him, it involved a sense of entitlement, dominance, and honor, produced by the constraints and vocabulary of his times. Following chapters setting up philosophical and political contexts, I demonstrate Manet's self-consciously rebellious, yet subtly manifested will and challenges to traditional

aesthetic dogma. In Chapter Five, I show with new depth how a gifted and brilliant painter who happened to be a woman, Berthe Morisot, became both Manet's rival and his muse. Later chapters demonstrate Manet's means to achieve meaning or its ostensible opposite and his effort to regain leadership after the younger Impressionists appeared to take over the avant-garde. Chapter Nine returns to Hamlet and the theme of the modern "situation," with the idea of irony as a way of life. And then finally, in Chapter Ten, the book will show Manet desperately clinging to his masculine self-image as he became increasingly disabled. Issues of dominance and leadership, key gendered attributes associated at the time with masculinity as an active, creative force, were manifestations of his willful resistance to the coercive strictures of his time.

In today's world of identity politics in art, the book has ramifications for many artists, both past and avant-garde, and Manet's personal Hamlet-like situation seems especially relevant. That is why Manet's painting of *Faure as Hamlet* serves as the focal point for much of the first half of this book and then again increasingly towards its end. We shall find through Manet's meditation on the fate of Hamlet that his struggle was a voyage of self-discovery and self-recognition. Eventually accepting his contradictory dualities—privileged versus marginal, traditionalist versus radical innovator—he wore them as a badge of honor, his sense of which was old-fashioned yet very much alive. Honor, as Robert A. Nye points out, is an essential feature of masculinity and sets a standard of empowerment "that is extremely fragile, is open to constant challenge, and produces keen feelings of vulnerability." He implies there is a crisis of masculinity during the period encompassing Manet's career.[5] As Goethe is said to have stated: "From the powers that bind all beings/ The man sets himself free who overcomes himself."[6]

Duplicity means pretending to be someone or something you are not. It is a strong word, but not necessarily negative, as when related to the role of the actor in a performance, as a means to survival, or to maintain one's self-esteem, as in Manet's case, through masculine display. Feminism has taught us for many years that a major, and often primary factor in the performance of an individual's identity is gender. Manet's duplicity often took the form of irony, as in the masculine bravery of making light of threats and circumstances that would otherwise require them to be seriously addressed. The word irony derives from the Greek word (Eironeia) for dissemblance. It is a kind of double-speak, where one audience hears or sees the literal meaning or representation, while the initiated or those with similar attitudes hear or see the opposite. In his short essay on humor, Freud's concept of humor is quite close to that of irony:

> There is no doubt that the essence of humor is that one spares oneself the affects to which the situation would naturally give rise and dismisses the possibility of such expressions of emotion with a jest. … The grandeur in it clearly lies in the triumph of narcissism, the victorious assertion of the ego's invulnerability. The ego refuses to be distressed by the provocations of reality, to let itself be compelled to suffer. It insists that it cannot be affected by the traumas of the external world; it shows, in fact, that such traumas are no more than occasions for it to gain pleasure. This last feature is a quite essential element of humor.[7]

Surely there was a touch of narcissism in Manet's general strategy of irony and playful humor, which generally called attention to himself and his will to master all situations, including when he may have felt vulnerable.

Role playing can be another form of duplicity: Born to circumstances that made him an ultimate insider, Manet played the outsider until finally, as I show with *Masked Ball at the Opera* (Figure 67), he took responsibility for the contradictions of his position, which led to his exploration of the human condition in *Hamlet*. Recent Manet studies have focused on the women who are the majority of figures in Manet's paintings and frequently the objects of his masculine artistic authority. Here, female models such as Victorine Meurent and Berthe Morisot are, of course, central to my argument, but I focus even more on exploring Manet's little-studied pictures of Hamlet as the ultimate embodiment of nineteenth-century male angst.

The book aims to show that Manet's efforts to maintain his power, dominance and even leadership in the realm of art during a repressive regime are accompanied by a Hamlet-like dialogue within himself. Constraints to his freedom and independence through censorship and exclusion can be understood as threats to his masculine identity and, therefore, shaped his responses. Manet's oppositional politics were, as will be shown, a major factor in his need for ironic duplicity. Hamlet's tragic flaw is usually understood to be his indecisiveness when faced with conditions that are primarily beyond his control. Although Hamlet's character cannot be called effeminate, his weakness can be construed as a tragic lack of sufficient masculine will, the latter associated with action and determination. Manet's response to his situation was different, if not directly opposed. I propose that Manet used the theme of Hamlet, to whose predicaments he was deeply sympathetic, as a means to meditate on his own situation. Unlike Hamlet, and with his close friend, the poet-critic Charles Baudelaire (1821–1867) as an important mentor, Manet responded to adversity through irony. With his role-playing and refusal to

conform to conventions, Manet maintained a stubborn struggle for acceptance right up until his death. Irony turns the tables on the expected relationship of power; it rhetorically transforms the objects of power into subjects themselves, reversing the expected outcome. Through Manet's painting of *Faure as Hamlet,* one can both view the modern condition and measure Manet's responses to it.

"L'art c'est le faux"[8]

A certain duplicity may be said to be at the heart of art, especially in figural painting, where the rank materials of paint—pigments suspended in linseed oil applied to canvas—masquerade as objects and figures from the world. This was the one sort of duplicity Manet aimed to expose by making his manually performed imitation (as opposed to academic and/or color-photograph-like illusionism) explicit. He forcefully displayed his control over the physical matter of painting through his open and sometimes sweepingly gestural brushwork. And yet despite flaunting his technique, it was successful and convincing just enough to create illusions of reality sufficient to make viewers respond both emotionally and physically. A further aspect of duplicity in naturalistic representations, or Realism, with which Manet was sometimes charged, is that a fabricated image can appear to take the place of reality itself, maintaining an illusion of neutral and objective truth. Even when representing inflammatory subject matter, such a painting seems to claim a documentary reality. In exposing things to view, such as social ills, those images have the power to affect our ways of thinking, and with them politics and history. In Manet's case, even his most anodyne pictures are often imbued with deep thought, irony, and a philosophy of life for the contemporary times they ostensibly depict.

As to the compositional aspects of his figure arrangements, Manet sometimes had their gazes imply a dialogue between artist and model that suggests the latter's response to his instructions, or otherwise disguising their thoughts. Other traits, such as bold and simplified color schemes and a dialogue between spatiality and flatness, may have been inspired partly by Japanese prints, but all these features had rarely appeared together in near life-sized European figure painting destined for viewing at public exhibitions. The result was a daring deconstruction of academic training and traditional painting as understood by most, and a style that became associated with modernity. His pictures always appeared willfully staged and crafted as well as disconcertingly present and real as objects.

The ironic self-consciousness underlying Manet's strategies, however, went considerably further than style or technique, for he recognized that the artist's role can be duplicitous in ways beyond the actual making of art. The experience of working under the authoritarian regimes of the Second Empire and early Third Republic, whose norms frustrated the painter's aspirations, clarified for Manet the necessity for his strategies. To pursue an authentic career—one he could believe in and maintain a sense of honor—he chose to play roles that made much of his work disruptive. While he most visibly challenged authority on aesthetic grounds, any such challenge was understood to be political, since the conservative government had a vested interest in a clear-cut hierarchy of genres of art and its traditionally executed and finished stylistic vehicle as promoted at the Paris Academy. Indeed, the head of the Academy—its official name was L'École Nationale des Beaux-Arts—Charles Blanc, was a friend of Manet's family; but despite living very near the institution, Manet refused to attend its classes. He preferred instruction and practice in the independent studio of a more stylistically and politically liberal painter named Thomas Couture, where Manet made several friends, as well as meeting his future model, Victorine Meurent.

Despite his privileged position as a comfortable white male scion of the upper bourgeoisie, Manet became a victim of exclusion and censorship not just because of his challenging artistic bravado featuring choppy brushwork and ostensible lack of finish, but also his political beliefs, which might be guessed through his early choices of ostensibly degrading Realist subject matter. This trend had seized public attention thanks to Manet's notorious predecessor, the militantly left-leaning so-called Realist painter Courbet, mentioned earlier. Unlike Courbet's unfazed, straightforward challenges to political authority, however, Manet attempted to navigate the repercussions of his commitments in multiple situations through compromises and duplicity. He also began to reflect deeply on the costs of those positions. This book shows how these reflections emerge, especially through his two pictures of Hamlet, of which this is the first in-depth study.[9] In order for their central position in his career to be understood, however, the Hamlet paintings must be seen in their various contexts—literary, theatrical, philosophical, political, and gendered—as well as in relation to other works by Manet himself.

The ideas of Baudelaire—who, in addition to his role as poet and critic, might also be called a philosopher—have always provided crucial insights for interpreting Manet and his work. While building on the many studies of both Manet and of Baudelaire that precede it, this book proposes a number of new

insights that result from interweaving art history, literary criticism, gender studies, theater, philosophy, politics, and biography. The notion of the artist as performer, and Manet's painting as performative, are themes in my previous writings, but this book is the first time I have considered paintings of actual performers. (And what could make more sense?!)[10] It places them in the light not only of Baudelaire's, but of Denis Diderot, Victor Hugo and others' theories concerning theater and their references to acting. It also, for the first time, considers them performances of masculinity.

A central theme is the widespread philosophical concept of the split self, noting that role-playing runs through both Manet's life and art, both his public persona and his private person. Its theories were current in Manet's time; its manifestations are present in both Manet's political and ostensibly apolitical work, genres that are usually considered separately. It abides in his public and private consciousness, the tenaciously masculinist character of which emerges in his relationship with Berthe Morisot and then becomes obvious during his illness with syphilis. The conditions under which he acted, although often dire in his time, were associated with modernity and still linger in the world today, as I suggest with occasional lines from contemporary commentators as chapter epigraphs. Such conditions especially affect those whose views differ from society at large or from its dominant forces. When irony is the response, it can be considered a psychological form of power— pretending to find humor in adversity creates the illusion of maintaining agency, ostensibly neutralizing threats by laughing them away.

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